DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 181 141 UD 020 071

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TITLE Political Dimensions of Asian-American Ethnicity: A Case Study of Asian-Indians.
INSTITUTION Old Dominion Univ., Norfolk. Dept. of Political Science.
PUB DATE 1 Dec 79
NOTE 13p.: Not available in paper copy due to reproduction quality of original document: Paper prepared for the Conference of Virginia Political Scientists (Fairfax, VA, December 1, 1979)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Asian Americans: *Ethnicity: *Immigrants: *Indians: Minority Groups: *Political Attitudes: Racial Discrimination

ABSTRACT

The decision of the United States Census Bureau to make a distinct classification of Asian-Indians is indicative of the growing awareness of this minority group on the American scene. The Asian-Indian organizations found in this country can be classified as parochial (based on language or caste) or Pan-Indian. These groups serve as foci for Asian-Indian self-consciousness in America and concern for events in India. Related to this is the growing participation of Asian-Indians in American political life and the continuing debate among them as to their most effective role in American society. (WP)

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POLITICAL DIMENSIONS OF ASIAN-AMERICAN ETHNICITY: A CASE STUDY OF ASIAN-INDIANS

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A paper prepared for presentation at panel No. 2 (Dimensions of Political Cultural Among Minorities in America) of 1979 Conference of Virginia Political Scientists.

December 1, 1979, 10:15 A.M.
Student Union Building, Room F
George Mason University Campus
Fairfax, Virginia

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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I

INTRODUCTION

During the last decade a large body of scholarly literature has emerged about the Asian-Americans.[1] Several such studies deal with the history of Asian-American immigration to the United States and their experiences with discriminatory orientations of the Americans.[2] The Political Scientists, however, have paid only a limited attention to this area of research.[3] The dimensions of Asian-American political sub-culture has been largely ignored by the leading American Political Scientists and there has been very little reference to the need for an exploration of Asian-American Political culture by the Senior scholars suggesting an agenda for future research.[4] This situation has somewhat changed with the emergence of Asian-American study centers at some major universities in the West Coast.[5] The purpose of this research is to explore the dimensions of the political sub-culture of overseas Indians in the United States. The U.S. Census of 1980 proposes to classify these people as "Asian-Indians" for the first time and it is expected that 1980 Census data would provide an authentic statistical profile about these people in the U.S.A. Much information utilized in this paper have been obtained from a number of working papers, government documents, scholarly writings and even from journalistic sources. In the absence of a more comprehensive data base, these sources do provide some useful information for the purpose of understanding the political sub-culture of an Asian-American community in the U.S.A.

II

POLITICAL SUB-CULTURE: THE THEORETICAL FOCUS

Since the publication of the monumental work of Almond and Verba, study of "political culture" has attracted the attention of Political Scientists.[6] Empirical political theorists have argued about the measurement problems associated with the construct "political culture." Perhaps the most significant conclusion that emerges from the varied national studies on "political culture" is that most political systems contain a wide range of "political sub-cultures" within their national framework. Such patterns may be associated with regional, ethnic, religious, linguistic, occupational and such other groups.

The members of such groups may indicate political orientations that are somewhat different from the pattern associated with the national political culture. A causal analysis of such trends have shown the relevance of many significant independent variables. Such theoretical concerns suggest the need for exploring the political sub-cultures in national political systems. In particular, such sub-cultural analyses seem highly pertinent in multi-ethnic political systems.

The present study involves an analysis of the political sub-culture of the Asian-Indians in the United States.[7]

Some historical literature suggest the political involvement of Overseas Indians (now known as Asian-Indians) in the U.S.A. During the freedom struggle in India, the Overseas Indians in America were instrumental in organizing a public awareness campaign about the Indian situation.[8] It is difficult to estimate to what extent such political involvement was pervasive

among the widely dispersed Overseas Indians in the United States. According to available data, it appears that such activities were limited to upper class Overseas Indians with western education. A great bulk of the Indian migrants known as "East Indians" were probably indifferent toward the political developments on the Indian sub-continent at the time. Very little systematic information is available about the political attitudes of the new immigrants from India. The purpose of this paper is to explore such activities. On the basis of such information, it is possible to derive certain general conclusions about the political subculture of the Overseas Indians in America.

III

POLITICS OF ASIAN-INDIAN ORGANIZATIONS

The Asian-Indian organizations are numerous in the country. A recently published Community Directory lists over 500 organizations of Indian origin which stretch from Hawaii to Virgin Islands.[9] There are reasons to believe that this enumeration of organizations is not complete. An analysis of the types of organizations indicates, a great majority of these organizations are campus-based organizations of student, faculty and alumni who also live in the geographically contiguous region. Such organizations have emerged on campuses where there are students of Indian origin.

The typical activities of student oriented Asian-Indian organizations centers around the celebration of 15th August and 26th January. The celebrations include potluck dinners, variety shows, cinemas and such other activities. These groups also organize the showing of Hindu movies on campus facilities. On occasions, issues of public policies generate

lectures, seminars and discussions. This model of "Indian Students Associations" is rather a pervasive one.

The internal political processes in such groups may involve leadership elections, voting, membership and such other elements. On larger campuses with sizeable linguistic groups, the conflict to control the Indian Student Association may center around such groups. At a particular point the association may be run by Punjabis, Bengalis, South Indians and so on. Even when most students may belong to the linguistic group such as the Gujratis, the regional conflict may emerge between the Saurastra Region people and the others. However, on the whole the power structure in such student groups tend to be rather fluid. The graduation and the arrival of new students tend to modify the power balance.

In a comparative study of the Indian organizations in the United States, Maxine Fisher draws a significant analytical distinction between "parochial Indian organizations" and the "Pan-Indian organization."[10] The ever-widening growth of parochial Indian organizations (based on language, religion, region, caste, etc.) continues and this process facilitates the coping process of the Indians of diverse cultural origin. But the rise of Pan-Indian organization such as the Association of Indians in America, the Federation of Indian Association, and the India League also strengthen the political element of Indian ethnicity in the U.S.A.

The India League of America is based in Chicago and this group was formed in 1964 and was then known as Federation of Indian Students' Associations. At present, it is recognized as non-profit tax-exempt socio-cultural, educational organization and prefers to call its membership as the "Indics." The Association of Indians in America was formed in 1967 at a convention of the Indian immigrants at Princeton, N. J.[11] This group

also has local chapters in selected cities of the United States that operate within the constitutional framework of the association.

IV

INTEREST IN INDIAN POLITICAL SYSTEM

Somewhat like the other American immigrant groups, the Asian-Indians continue to retain a strong interest in Old Country India. The following excerpt from the inaugral speech of a President of the Association of Indians in America at the Conference on "New Perspective on India-U.S. Economic Cooperation" held in New Delhi is highly suggestive of the orientations of Asian-Indians toward India.

> We believe that we can be proud citizens of the land we have immigrated to. We also believe that we can continue to be partners in the continued prosperity of India, the LAND OF OUR ROOTS. We strongly believe that we shall be able to play a positive role in bringing the peoples of India and the United States-- who have a great deal in common--to understand each other better. In our efforts, we shall seek your cooperation and counsel. May God help us! God bless America! Jai Hind!
>
> SOURCE: The Journal, Vol. 4, No. 2, Fall 1979, p. 2.

Most post-1965 Indian immigrants continue to have some interest in the Indian political system. This is reflected in thematic contents of the Indian news media. Major political developments in India do generate letters to the editor in such papers. Most conspicuous development in this respect involved the emergency in India.[12] A number of organizations emerged opposing the regime of Mrs. Indira Gandhi and a few others emerged supporting her economic policies. The political fugitives from India were provided with a platform to speak out on issues associated with the repression of the regime in power. Such dissident groups in India were provided financial contributions by some Overseas Indians living in the U.S.A.

ASIAN-INDIANS AND THE AMERICAN POLITICAL SYSTEM

What is the extent of involvement of the Asian-Indians with the American POlitical Systems? Reviewed in a historical perspective the Asian-Indians have been involved to a varying degree. During the early party of the 20th Century, it is reported that at least two political organizations were formed in the Pacific Coast of America to protect the interests of the immigrants from India.[13] At least one Indian has served as a Congressman from California.[14] In recent years, a few Indians have contested municipal elections and a few have been elected to councilmanic offices. Political groups have been organized to support candidates running for state and other offices. There is a recognized Asian-Indian caucus in the Democratic Party of the U.S.A.[15] The native organization of Asian-Indian have attempted to establish contact with the national leadership.

In the New York/New Jersey regions where the Asian-Indians are highly concentrated, the political leaders in those regions have attempted to co-opt the Asian-Indian leaders for electoral other types of political support.

The Asian-Indians have utilized their "ethnic press" to speak out on issues directly affecting their community.

A rather interesting issue which some involvement of Asian-Indian relates to what is called "The Patel Motel Controversy." The Asian-Indian organized groups and individuals have projected the racial overtone of the American news media is relation to this issue. The organization also established direct contact with the immigration department and the Department of Justice.

A limited survey of the Asian-Indians has indicated their high level of concerns about American public policies.[16] Such data indicates that their concerns are comparable to that of the American public except in certain specific areas.

The involvement of Asian-Indians is highly visible in the areas of ethnic concerns. The classification of the Indians in the U.S. as Asian-Indians by the Census bureau is clearly an impact of Asian-Indian lobby.

VI

POLITICS OF ETHNIC MINORITY STATUS

The racial classification of Asian-Indians in the United States has been varied. Many terms have been coined to describe the people of Indian origin in the U.S.A. These include "East Indians," "Hindous," "Pagheads," (especially for turban wearing silks), "Overseas Indians," "Indics," and "Indians."[17] Some of them do have perjorative connotation. For a number of years they were classified as "Caucasians" on account of their Asian origin. But systematic discrimination were practiced to deny their citizenships.

The issue of racial classification created some sharp division in this community. The Association of Indians in American spear-headed the movement for classification as "Asian-Indians." The Chicago-based India League opposed this and suggested the term "Indic." However, the U.S. Bureau of Census introduced Asian-Indian. How do the people of this community feel about their minority status. An earlier survey indicates that the opinion continues to be divided. Some perceive the benefits of "projected class" status and the other disagree.[18]

VII

FUTURE OF ASIAN-INDIAN ETHNIC POLITICS AND AREAS OF RESEARCH

The immigration of Asian-Indians to the United States is expected to grow under the existing system of immigration laws. However, such immigration is likely to alter the pattern of their social profile. A broader section of Indians are likely to come to the U.S. The Asian-Indian youth is likely to emerge as a major factor in the future matrix of the Asian-American ethnicity. What sort of areas or research are likely to emerge as significant?

Political socialization of Asian-Indian youth is likely to emerge as a rather intriguing arena of research. In all probability their political socialization would be influenced by a number of factor including their spatial relationship with other Indians, parental political orientation, impact of school and such other factors.

The future political roles of Hindu temples may also be examined by the future scholars. These temples are growing in number all over the U.S. Such temples are involved in socialization programs for their Asian-Indian youths. It may be interesting to examine the impact of such comments.

The organizational politics in the Asian-Indian community is likely to provide another major area of research. The motivation of organizational leaders, the relationship before organization and its member are some areas of inquiry. The inter-organizational relationship is also likely to emerge as an area of research.

A rich source of information above the Asian-Indian community politics is available through the Overseas News Media. Such media may

range from little newsletters to nationally circulated weekly newspapers and language magazines.

India has been a small factor for the foreign policy elites of the U.S. Almost every Overseas Indian is cognizant of this. The attention that the U.S. news media pays to the visiting Israeli or Arab dignitaries is rarely extended to the Indian visitors. What sort of impact is likely to be created by the Asian-Indian community on the future of American foreign policy in relation to India and that of India toward the United States? This seems to be another area of inquiry.

An overview of Asian-Indian press shows the presence of a feature on "Legal Information and Assistance." Such columns generally answer legal questions by the reader. These columns also include articles advising the Indians about their rights in the areas of immigration, sponsorship and relations, property, insurance and many such features. Given their population in the Overseas Indian News Media, and the frequency of advertisement offering legal services, the legal needs of Asian-Indian community seems to be another area of future research.

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